

# SO THIS IS TRISTAN DA CUNHA



# A photoguide to the world's loneliest island in the South Atlantic Ocean

by

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*(Former Head teacher of the island school)*

## with Philatelic notes.

'So this is Tristan da Cunha' is a first hand account of a visit to the world's loneliest inhabited island. The photographs, taken over a four year period 1974 - 1978, show life on Tristan as it really is.

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## ARRIVAL AND SHORT HISTORY

The sky patterns change as the little ship approaches the waters around Tristan. From fifty miles away the giant cloud pillar can be seen long before land is sighted. It is a rare sight to see the volcanic peak towering 6760ft. over the world's loneliest island.

Radio contact has been made for several days, and news of the new arrivals has been discussed among the islanders. "How many bags of mail?" comes crackling over the air waves from the radio shack, just above the boat harbour on Tristan. The ship's captain gives the information and then enquires about the sea conditions at the anchorage, and more importantly for unloading the passengers and cargo.

The ship continues to roll and pitch on the restless waves of the southern ocean. The great wandering albatrosses peel off as the ship nears the island, and the new arrivals gaze at the towering bulk of land with its head in the clouds and feet ringed in white surf. The cliffs are steep, with sparse vegetation, and great gulches have been carved by centuries of heavy windlashed rain.

This austere coastline gives way to a low promontory jutting out from the northern shore which is the beginning of the settlement plain.

The volcano of 1961 lies dormant but still warm, and occasionally steaming to the east of the little village, which will be home from many of the passengers for several years to come.

So this is Tristan da Cunha. The white washed houses each set in their own garden plots nestle under the towering cliff. Big watron bubbles out at the spring line to provide pure fresh water and so a human habitation can survive and even flourish in an otherwise hostile environment. Little activity is seen in the village. The cattle roam in the back fence, but down at the harbour boats are being prepared and crowds gather to greet the new arrivals. The ship anchors just to the east of the harbour and still rolls gently in the Atlantic swell. The small motor barges break out from the harbour entrance, and can be seen making for the ship. The passengers line the rail and look down with expectation as the men of Tristan draw their boats alongside and scramble aboard. There is a constant banter between islanders and ship's crew as old friendships are renewed. This is an exciting day for it has been several months since a ship visited, and some supplies are very low.

The Administrator greets new arrivals aboard the ship and the island men give a cautious nod of welcome, as the baggage, mail and passengers go aboard the bobbing barge. The sea is quite swelly as the powerful motorboat approaches the harbour entrance. The sea foams on the protective concrete (dolos) either side of the entrance and the remaining part surges through the gap. A man signals from a high point on the West side, and the boat circles slowly just outside the line of breaking seas. Another signal is given, the engine roars and the boat makes for the harbour entrance at full speed. Seas break ahead and only a small wave comes astern as the boat shoots into the relative calm of Tristan harbour.

The boat draws alongside the quay, a crane towers overhead, and people gaze down from every vantage point. The women stand afar off, children in giggly groups, and the men busy themselves with baggage and mail.

After a week of pitching and rolling from Cape Town it is strange to set foot on dry land again. It is a gentle walk up the harbour road and round a moderate bend to see the village which is to be home. Government buildings abound, the island store, radio shack, school, and the main administrative building. Above the harbour stands the grey businesslike building of the fish factory on which much of the economy depends.

Beyond the industrial and commercial, lies the village proper, with charming croftlike Tristan houses, clean and fresh, some with thatch, but most roofed in asbestos sheets.

This is the settlement founded by William Glass, who in 1816 decided to remain on the island with his wife and children, having been part of the garrison station on Tristan to secure the detention of Napoleon Bonaparte on St. Helena. He was joined by others, either by choice or by shipwreck. Arrangements were made by a certain Captain Am, who for £50 persuaded five good women from St. Helena to sail to Tristan. They married the castaways and the community flourished. Trade was good with passing sailing ships until the opening of the Suez Canal. In the lean years some families left and other mariners were shipwrecked, so that by the turn of the century the population was about 75 souls. In the twentieth century the establishment of the crayfish industry and the commercial success of the philatelic department have placed the island on a firm financial footing.

The population rose to nearly 300 but the seven names of Glass, Hagan, Green, Rogers, Swain, Repetto, and Lavarello remain to this day.

Tristan hit the headlines in 1961, when a volcanic eruption caused a total evacuation of the island. The volcano to the east of the village destroyed the fish factory, completely engulfed the two safe landing beaches, and was threatening the settlement with molten lava and destruction.

Two years later when the volcano had settled down, the people returned, and set about rebuilding their island homes. This book illustrates how Tristan survived the natural disaster, and entered the 20th century, trusting in God, hard work and good sense.

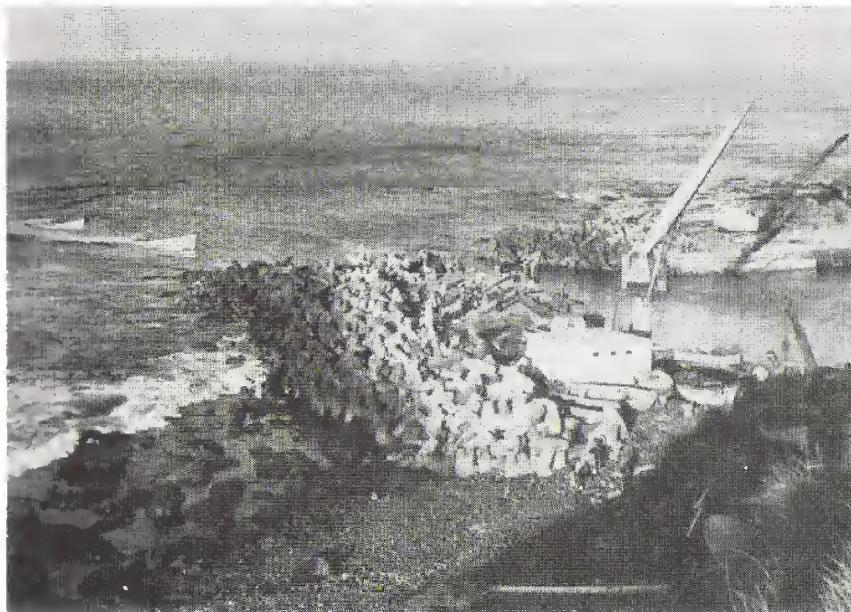


The settlement from the anchorage.



The ship (Tristania II) anchored closer than usual and the company barge enters the tiny harbour.

Philatelic notes:- see *Tristania II on Festival of Stamps*. 76 25p. Airletter 5p.  
London 80 5p. The barge London 80 10p



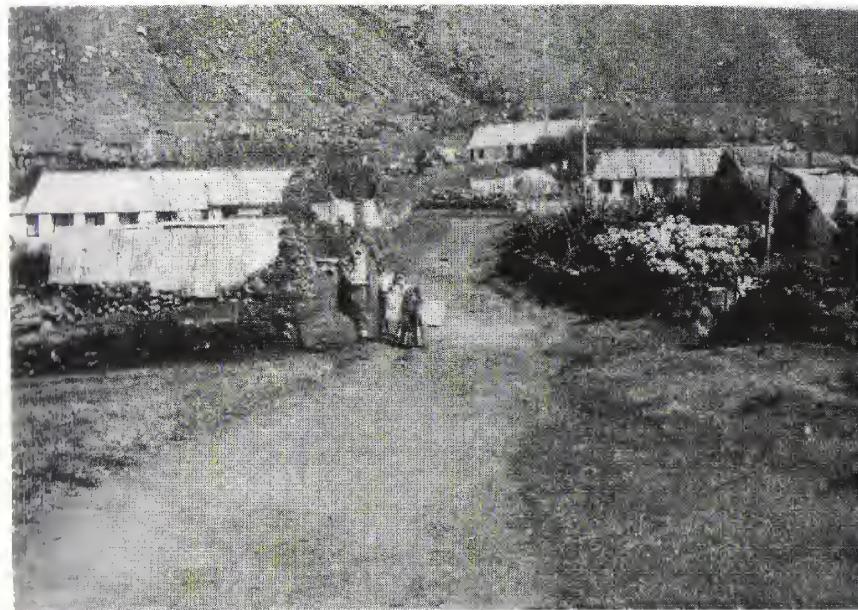
## LAND AND SEA

The harbour at Tristan juts out defiantly into the frequently stormy South Atlantic Ocean. On fine days the 20 or so shore based fishing boats are able to put to sea in search of the Tristan crayfish which abound in the waters around the island. The wind in this part of the Southern ocean is seldom still and constantly moves in an anticlockwise direction, taking a week to ten days to complete a cycle. When the wind is in the lee or moderate in strength the boats can put to sea but at other times giant waves pound violently against the 2 ton protective dolos which have been strategically placed on the seaward side.

1. A fine evening as the boats return from fishing. A net of crayfish is just being hoisted out of a boat and the tractor and trailer will take the catch up the hill to the factory for processing. (*Philatelic note See London 80 issue esp. 10p*)
2. A particularly violent storm which took away three boats from the quay wall and lifted several 2 ton dolos into the harbour.
3. The view looking down from the white stone above Hottentot Gulch. The road up from the harbour passes the station where the British expatriates live in Colt bungalows and colonial style houses. To the West of the harbour is the fish factory. Power lines can be seen leading up the hill from the power house providing a 240v supply to all homes.

(*Philatelic note:- Harbour before dolos Mar '78 20p*





## HOMES

William Glass, the founder of the present community came from Kelso in Scotland and it is quite probable that the croft like appearance of Tristan homes are of Scottish origin. The tussock grass or flax thatch has given way to the maintenance free and weather proof asbestos. Very few thatched houses remain and more recent buildings have been constructed of concrete blocks made from local black sand and imported cement.

The Tristan home is comfortable and well furnished. The door leads straight into a well fitted kitchen with smart units, gas cooker, refrigerator and stainless steel sink unit. Most householders retain their open fires placed discreetly hidden behind a panel and since the cost of fuel has risen so dramatically in recent years, greater use is being made of wood fires.

The living room is always kept as a special room with comfortable chairs, smart wallpaper, momentos on the walls, treasured photographs in frames, and often fitted carpets. Tristan people are given to much hospitality so the living room though special, is used frequently. Each house usually has a flower garden at the front and vegetables are grown in clearings in the flax which gives good protection from the frequent high winds.

(The 1961 volcano can be seen to the left in both pictures)

The flag of St. Helena flies from the flag staff and the Union flag flutters above the front door of the Residency, home of the Administrator. Known as the big house by the island population it is set in modest grounds overlooking the sea. The longboats are stored upside down and well secured for the winter months on the grass verge to the East of the Residency, and it is inspection day when all eight are being checked for seaworthiness.





## GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS

Government buildings are plain but functional (that is the Government of Tristan da Cunha). The main administrative building to the West of the village houses the council chamber, treasury, public library, the Administrator's office, various departmental heads' Offices, and the Post Office.

The postmaster is also the superintendent of telecommunications as well as posts. A new radio shack has been built to house the main transmitters, met office and local radio studio.

Daily skeds keep Tristan in communication with the outside world via Cape Town and weather information is sent on to the met station on Gough Island 230 miles to the South.

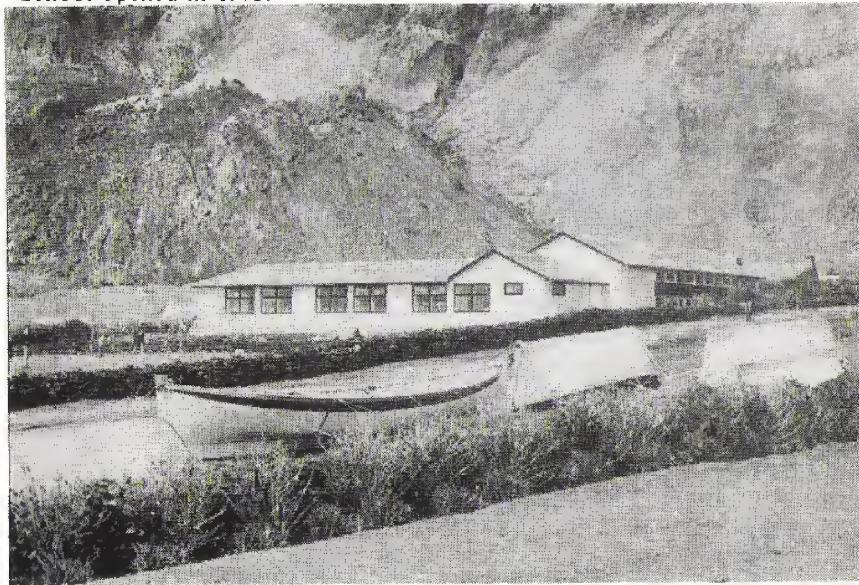
Ship visits are quite rare, but if a vessel is passing near the island it will usually alter course and come right in close, hooting loudly, and make radio contact for a brief exchange of greetings.

1. The main government building known locally as the New Building stands starkly against the serrated edges of the Goatridge. Further up the hill stands the hospital and the Doctor's Colt bungalow.
2. The old radio shack to the left of the picture is now the guest house with the portakabin serving as the bathroom. The flat roofed new radio building was built in 1977 along with the new 100ft. aerial.
3. A ship (Anco Empress) passes close to the harbour as the radio staff call her up on a hand held set. Police sergeant Albert Glass B.E.M. looks on.





1. The summit of the 1961 volcano gives a good view over the village. The large building to the left of centre is the Prince Philip Hall, focal point of social activities, and the large four sided building to the right of centre is St. Mary's School opened in 1975.



2. St. Mary's School with the 1961 volcano looking menacingly close behind, but the cliff towers to about 2000 feet and is often hidden in cloud.

## ST. MARY'S SCHOOL

Between St. Mary's School and the sea lies a field known as American Fence. The new school, built by the islanders replaces a World War II series of huts in the old station. Opened in 1975, the school provides full time education for all ages from four and a half to fifteen plus. There is an Education Officer/ Head of School who has a staff of one U.K. teacher ( Science and Maths etc. for O'Level work) and four locally trained island teachers. The number on the roll stands at around seventy pupils but pre school playgroup and further education classes extend the range of educational activities.

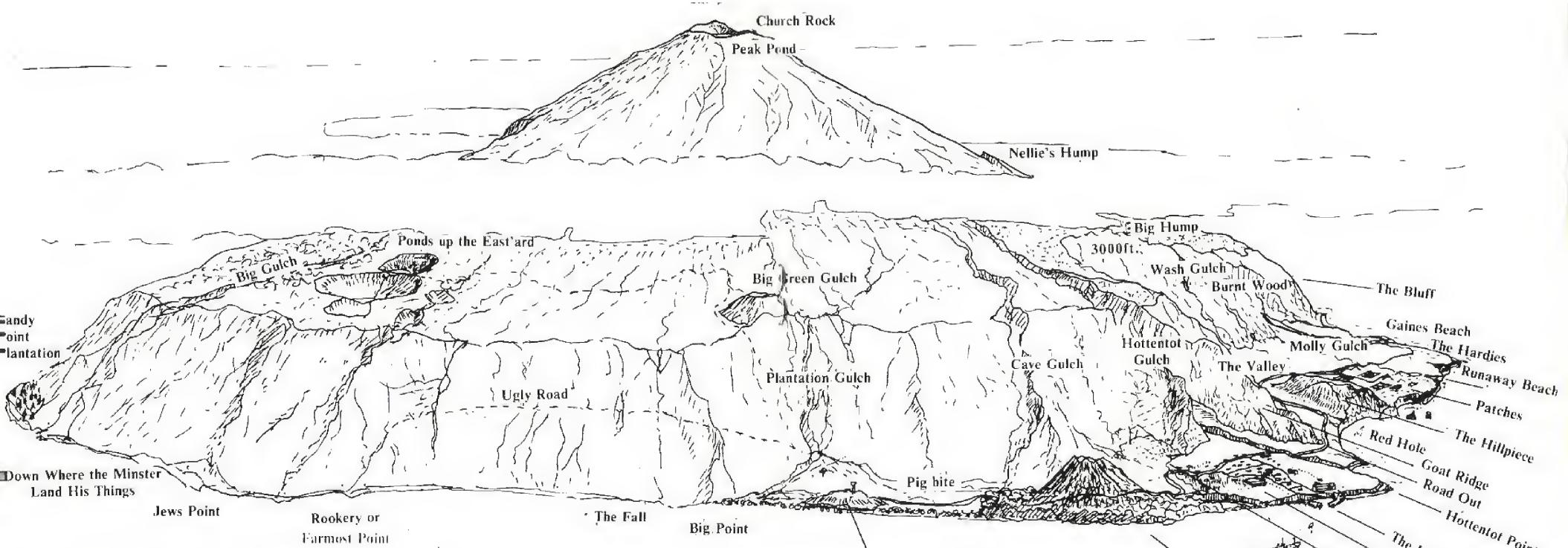
The well equipped building has a craft block, home economics and science facilities. It is sited around a central courtyard, where plants are grown and an old Tristan Ox cart stands. On the West side there is a fine hall with a stage and gymnasium equipment.

The curriculum is very British, using standard U.K. Text books, and eventually working towards O'Level examinations for some pupils.

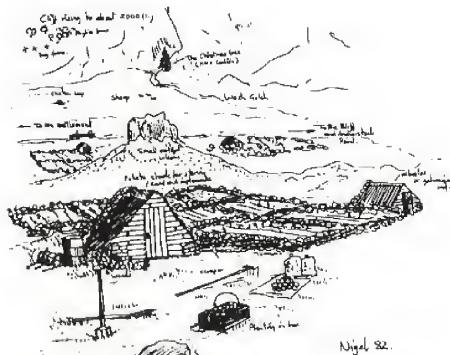
3. Children of the senior class sit chatting during a break in lessons. School books on the ground include Beta 4 Mathematics as used in British schools. American fence also serves as a sports and games field where football, hockey and rounders are played. A variation of rounders, kicking a football is very popular.

To the East of the school there is a vegetable garden, and hens are kept on a scientific basis. Dramatic productions are very popular and the hall with its stage is ideal.





TRISTAN DA CUNHA  
SOUTH ATLANTIC OCEAN  
37°5'S 12°15'W

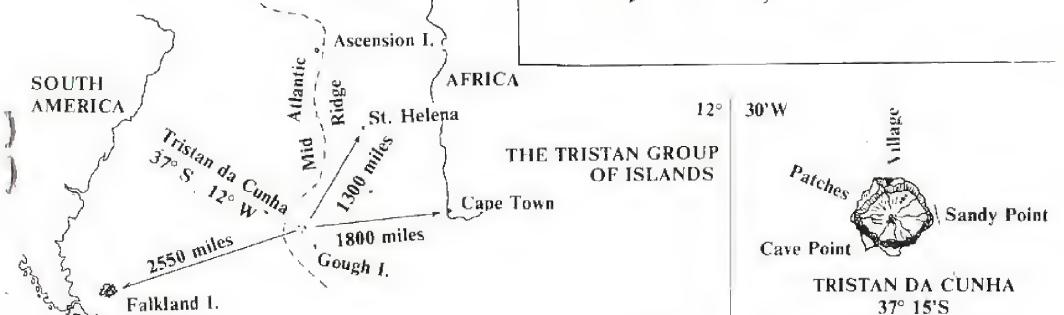


Nigel 82.



OLD AND NEW STYLE TRISTAN HOUSES

12



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Ned's

Cove

Stoltenhoff I.

Middle or Alex I.

Landing

GOUGH ISLAND

230 nautical miles

NIGHTENGALE I.

14

1. Herbert Glass, a direct descendant of William Glass, holds a mollymawk, or yellow nosed albatross. He stands on the base among bog ferns above the 2000 ft. cliff on the less steep slope that leads to the peak.

2. The road out to the West goes up through the valley. To the left is the cliff face leading to the base, and to the right is the Hillpiece, another extinct volcano now resembling gently rolling downs. Beyond are the potato patches and the low plateau leading to the Bluff.

3. A Tristan starchy standing among the bog ferns looks on with curiosity. They have little or no fear of man and will land on your legs and feet if you sit very still. This thrush like bird is one of three types found only on the Tristan group.

*Philatelic Note:- Definitive Issue 77 £2*



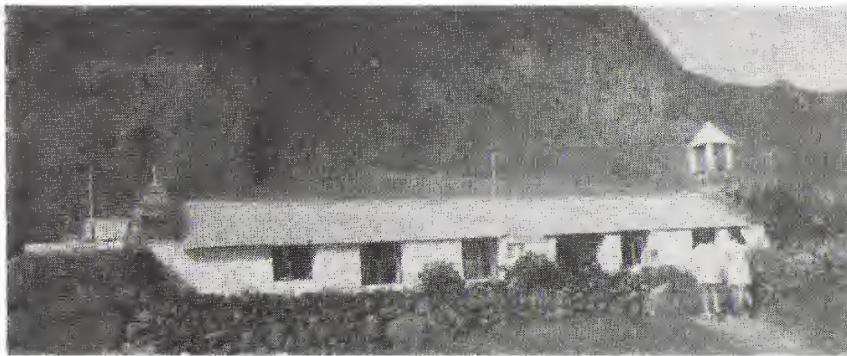
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## ST. MARY'S CHURCH

The little church with lava stone end walls lean to South transept, tin roof and squat bell tower, is positioned in the centre of the village.



2. A picture of Queen Victoria, a signed gift to Peter Green, looks from the West Wall. The pews were a gift from a London Church; the little font was retrieved after a shipwreck and the harmonium bears the inscription:- "This harmonium was presented to the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Tristan da Cunha, by her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 1960."



BISHOP LESLIE STRADING poses with committee during a seven yearly visit.



Looking East towards the Sanctuary the Numbers are for 'Hymns Ancient and Modern' the Mothers' Union banner stands in the corner and stations of the Cross hang round the walls.



## CELEBRATIONS



1. After the wedding Church service, the reception is held in the Prince Philip Hall. The most professional wedding cake was made locally as were most of the dresses.
2. Birthdays are a special time for celebration. Expatriates and Islanders join together for a special lunch given to mark a 21st Birthday, when practically every one on the island will have been feasted.
3. Old Year's Night or New Year's Eve is a men's event. The women and especially young ladies hide to avoid being caught by the cleverly disguised men folk. Celebrations go on nearly all night as the revellers call at each other's houses in turn.



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## GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL

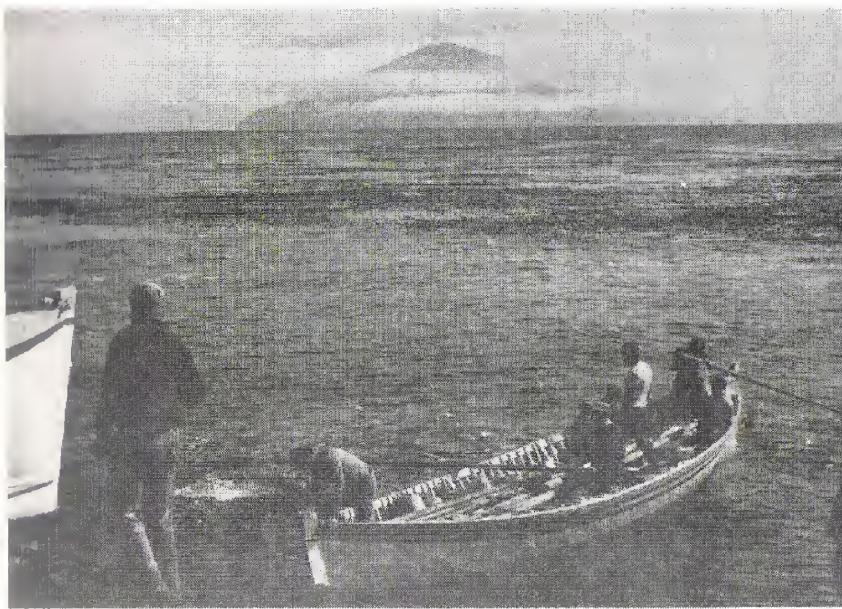
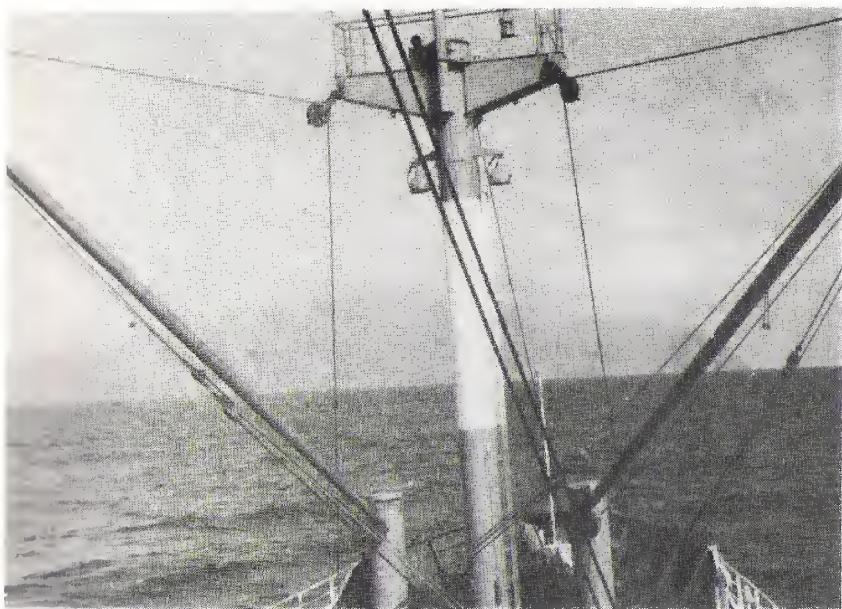
1. Tristan people go on holiday to their own special island, 25 miles to the South West. The crew relax as the wind carries the canvas covered open boat across the open sea to the almost legendary Nightingale Island.

2. Stirling Castle is one of the eight longboats sailing for Nightingale. The seven other names are:- Britannia, British Flag, Margaret Rose, Canton, British Trader, Lorna, and Union Castle.



3. Nightingale Island, the nesting ground of the Great Shearwater, various types of albatross, and multitudes of rockhopper penguins, is a very pleasant place of escape for the Tristan Islanders. Vegetation is quite lush and the going relatively easy but there is no reliable supply of fresh water.

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## FAREWELL

The people of Tristan say goodbye as you walk down the harbour road, wishing you a good voyage back to the outside world.



The author's three children stand where farewells are made, and then you and your baggage will go aboard the barge.

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